

OUR VIEW

Need science and sensibility instead of health ordinances

CALDWELL County has exactly one local health ordinance. It was not written to protect the citizenry from the Spanish flu outbreak that killed 100 million people worldwide in 1918. It was not written to save children from the polio pandemic of 1952. It was not written in response to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s.

It was written in 1997 to stop corporate hog farms from spreading into the area. Urged on by commissioners from Linn County, the Caldwell County commissioners passed a health ordinance that required wide setback areas and costly county permits for those who would raise animals in confinement.

And it has been successful. Premium Standard Farms and other large pork operations looked elsewhere to build their contract finishers.

Now the issue of local health ordinances is heating up again. As of early January, 12 counties in Missouri had county health ordinances. At press time, at least five more were considering adding them.

There was a time when pork production was an economic engine of Caldwell County, where I live and farm. Every neighbor on our rural gravel road raised a few commercial hogs during the 1960s. Two farms sold breeding stock. One farm also sold swine feed supplements.

It's a different story these days. Swine production began a slow decline in the 1970s. After the local health ordinance went into place — whether because of that regulation or in spite of it — the decline turned to collapse. According to Census of Agriculture statistics, Caldwell County had 21,499 hogs in inventory on Dec. 31, 1997, the year the ordinance took effect. By the 2002 census, inventory had fallen to 2,368 head — an 89% drop.

Linn County, which has been held up as the hero of local health ordinances, has experienced a similar decline. Hog numbers fell from 27,078 in 1997 to 6,299 by 2002. And the number of pork producers in Linn County fell from 62 in

Key Points

- County health ordinances keep out large confinement livestock operations.
- Ordinances prevent expansion and new operators from entering business.
- Adopting science and cooperative efforts can help farms and neighbors coexist.

1997 to 22 by 2002.

I would like to provide you with a comparison to Daviess County, our neighbor to the north, that does not have any such local health rules. Statisticians cannot release county data from there, however, in order to protect corporate confidentiality. I can tell you that hog inventory went from 24,500 in 1992 to 96,000 by 1999, the last year data was provided. That's nearly a four-fold increase.

Proponents of county health ordinances say such rules boost chances for small independent pork producers to develop profitable niche markets for locally grown products. That's a great idea, but it's going to have to happen soon, or pork production will completely disappear from my county. Only one neighbor on our road now operates a commercial swine farm.

County commissioners and all citizens must realize that simple solutions can have far-reaching consequences.

The Caldwell County ordinance affects farms with as few as 300 animal units in confinement. That's not much bigger than a 4-H project in today's unforgiving global ag economy. The local health ordinance basically tells Caldwell County farmers who want to expand their livestock operations to go somewhere else to do it. Perhaps another county, or another state, will be more supportive of livestock production at the scale required to be globally competitive.

... or another nation. Brazil opens its arms to livestock production: the bigger the unit, the better. That country is building state-of-the-art packing plants designed to export pork, poultry and

beef back to the United States.

And just because you're a crop farmer, you're not immune to having local legislation change your farming plans. California has seen 18 counties consider anti-GMO ordinances. If you're in Mendocino County, you won't be growing any Roundup Ready soybeans this year, because — citing potential health concerns — that county no longer allows GMO crops.

Perhaps it is time to think before we enact any more county health ordinances. Through cooperation by all parties, our energies and money can find a way to create natural buffer zones between farms and rural residences so that both can coexist.

The subject of our cover story, Scott Hays, and his family have diligently practiced good environmental stewardship. Now, his farm is one of a dozen Missouri swine operations involved in a new Environmental Management Systems pilot study, sponsored by the Missouri Pork Association. Through the study, producers will develop a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan to enhance eco-friendly management practices on the farm.

Missouri Ruralist endorses projects like this. Let's use science to help control odor, noise and dust without snaring Missouri farmers in local red tape.



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Legislators want scientific solutions

Editor's note: The following is a joint statement released Jan. 19 as this issue of Missouri Ruralist went to press. The statement is from Sen. Dan Clemens, R-Marshfield, and Rep. Peter Myers, R-Sikeston. Clemens is chairman of the Missouri Senate Agricultural Committee and Myers chairs the House Agricultural Committee.

DUE to recent announcements and developments by the Missouri Department of Agriculture and several agricultural interest groups, we have decided not to attempt to pass legislation on issues pertaining to animal feeding operations.

Both of us, along with the departments of agriculture and of natural resources, the Missouri Association of Counties, agriculture-oriented organizations, small and large farmers, and concerned citizens, have worked for an extended period of time to draft a bill that would preserve sensible local controls, protect the environment and enable animal agriculture to expand its operations in Missouri.

We believe it is prudent to allow non-legislative solutions to our agricultural opportunities for farmers of all sizes to be explored and implemented. We will be taking an active role in these solutions as well, but not through official legislative session time.

MDA, in unison with the private sector and working with some of our best and brightest engineers that our universities offer, is making great strides in reducing and potentially removing odor from animal operations.

MDA, working with the Missouri Pork Association and the University of Missouri Commercial Agriculture Program, is also developing a Blue Ribbon self-audit program for best management practices in the swine industry. This will follow the successful blueprint used in the canine breeding Blue Ribbon program over the past year.

The Missouri Pork Association is also leading the way with innovative programs to develop Comprehensive Nutrient Management programs and to build upon current environmentally friendly farm-management practices. It is also working with private industry to develop innovative technology converting the byproduct of hogs into new energy sources.

County governments will be banding together to form an Agricultural Impact Task Force made up of leaders from across the state to study and report on what is and is not working when it comes to local government and agriculture working together.

Agriculture associations are joining forces to work together to become better neighbors with all of Missouri, to promote the fact that agriculture is the No. 1 industry in our state, and to move toward commonsense solutions, instead of heated rhetoric, whenever disagreements arise between differing opinions.

We will continue to work to make sure that Missouri remains agriculturally friendly while providing sound environmental protections. We realize that if conditions do not improve on all sides soon, we will run the risk of losing the businesses we already have.

Correction

IN our January issue article, "First QSA sale leaves Missouri in prime cattle export position," page 4, it was incorrectly reported that the Joplin Regional Stockyards was the first to conduct a Quality Systems Assessment age- and source-verified cattle sale on Dec. 1, 2005.

The Eastern Missouri Commission Co., Bowling Green, held the first official sale on Nov. 16, 2005. A total of 2,440 head of QSA and VAC 45 certified cattle were sold at Bowling Green. Three representatives from Japan's meat industry were on hand to view the sale.

As of mid-January, more than 20,000 head of cattle have qualified for the Missouri Department of Agriculture's QSA program, according to Greg Onstott, MDA Division of Animal Health.

QSA sales have been conducted at Joplin Regional Stockyards, Bowling Green, Kingsville, Maryville, New Cambria and Farmington markets.

Missouri Ruralist welcomes your opinion on important issues that affect you, your farming business and Missouri agriculture.

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